

Digging up the people of Roman Britain

Natalya Kahn

Ancient literary sources described the Roman conquest of the British Isles, and cast some light on the interaction of Romans and natives – Tacitus' *Agricola* is the best example. But even this text has a particular and narrow focus on great military events, and can't tell us much about the smaller realities of daily life. For that we need to get our hands dirty, as Natalya Kahn explains in her Gladstone prizewinning article...

"Andy!" came a shout across the field as Dr Andrew Birley, Director of Excavations at Vindolanda, was called to inspect a new find. Alerted by the archaeologists' excitement, we volunteers gathered round and watched as a beautiful, but sadly headless, statue of the goddess Fortuna (below) was brought into the daylight once again after so many centuries. This artefact sheds light on the spiritual needs of the Roman soldiers and settlers in this part of Britain. Religion was an important part of Roman society and culture throughout the empire, but probably especially so at the borders; Vindolanda was the edge of the civilized world to the soldiers stationed there, who faced their enemies in wet, cold Northumbria, far from home. The choice of the goddess Fortuna, who was associated with chance and luck, good or bad, was appropriate to worship in this location and highlights the importance of the gods to Romans as they went about their daily lives.

The stories objects tell

Although we learn a lot about Roman Britain from ancient literary sources, we get only one man's ideas at a time. Often the mundane details of everyday life are not included, because they were of no interest to the writer – why include the details which everyone knows, or which are irrelevant to the literary subject at hand? However, from archaeological and other sources we get a more three dimensional picture. By looking at and understanding the objects and trying to view them through the original owners' eyes, we get closer to the people themselves.

Even more exciting finds from Vindolanda are the wooden tablets which give us an enormous insight into Romans'

lives because they show us some of the everyday details which were not thought interesting enough to be recorded officially.

One of the more well known letters is a birthday invitation from Severa, a wife of an officer, to her friend Lepidina (shown on p. 28). On it was a personal message from the birthday girl herself, which is the earliest example of a woman's writing. Severa's few words say:

I shall expect you, sister. Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail.

This shows us that officers could bring their wives with them, that birthdays were celebrated with parties and also that some women were educated in Roman society and could write. However, she did use a scribe to write the bulk of the letter. This shows that Roman officers were quite well paid and could afford to keep a scribe and let their wives have parties. There are other clues to this: on the rubbish dump at the fort was found a very nice, very expensive, lady's shoe with an easily fixable break. It had been thrown away instead of having it mended, so the owner was obviously not worried about lack of funds. Another import from the continent that made it all the way to Vindolanda was 'Samian ware' pottery from Gaul. We found quite a lot during the week I spent there last summer. A whole set was found broken, probably after it had been dropped on the journey, so it had been thrown away. It would have been very expensive, not least because of the transport costs involved.

Designs for living: Roman domestic décor

Decoration was equally a very important

part of the Roman culture in Britain. The fragments of painted plaster and mosaics that we have left, for example, at Bignor Roman Villa and Fishbourne Roman Palace, show that the Romans who could afford it liked to live with ornamentation around them. In the reconstruction of the villa at Wroxeter, based on the excavations of actual Roman villas, we get an idea of this with the brightly coloured walls and frescoes. This desire to brighten up their houses is understandable to anyone who lives with Britain's weather, especially for people who had been used to living in Italy and the Mediterranean and it was also a good way to show off their wealth. Romans also had a taste for jewellery and other personal decoration. At many museums in Britain, you will often find earrings, beads, and rings which are really beautiful. At Vindolanda, another prize find was a glass which had been decorated with a painting of gladiators.

Food was also an important part of Roman culture and we can learn about it from remnants in amphorae and also from the Vindolanda tablets. In London many amphorae were found which were used for shipping wine, olive oil, olives and fish sauce. A lot of the tablets contained accounts, some of which were about food. These contain lists of the food they would have eaten, for example:

Massic wine, barley, Celtic beer, sour wine, fish sauce, pork-fat, wine. (Tablet 190)

At Vindolanda, I was digging in the drains and I found a lot of bones, mostly cow and pig teeth, which indicate that these animals were an important part of the diet.

A darker side of life in Roman Britain

But life was not always so peaceful for the inhabitants of Roman Britain. Another story I heard on Hadrian's Wall was that of the finding of a skeleton of a child. This child was about 10 years old and was found in the barracks from around the middle of the 3rd century. He or she was tied up and died from a blow to the head. The child was left in a corner and covered

in animal bones, probably to disguise the smell of decomposition. As well as the suspicious circumstances in which the body was found, human burials in built-up areas were strictly forbidden in Roman times. We can deduce that this death surely indicated a criminal act. Here we see a darker side to the Romans' lives; they lived with such risks, just as now. Here we see that there was also a moral code by which Romans in Britain lived, which meant that this incident was unacceptable and had to be concealed. This child had lived in the Mediterranean until he or she was about 8, when they had moved to Britain, which meant they were either a slave or a child of a soldier. The disappearance of a child from such a small community must have been very similar to that of little April Jones in Machynlleth recently and probably just as devastating.

Keeping the Brittunculi at bay

Tablet 164 from Vindolanda also gives us an insight into how the Romans viewed the native Britons. In it, a new word *Brittunculi* is used which is translated as 'wretched Britons'. This is hardly respectful to the locals and this shows us that the Romans in Britain and the Britons were separate and that Roman society certainly viewed itself as superior.

The presence of Hadrian's Wall can also tell us a lot. It was a boundary between the Roman world and the uncivilized country beyond. It was 73 miles long, 15 feet high, and took 6 years to build. This was a permanent border. Roman society in Britain was cutting itself off from the hostile barbarians – or was it? Recently people have discovered, by looking at aerial photographs, many interesting features which may point to a different view. They not only found the camps of the men who built the wall, but also that there were Iron Age settlements there from many centuries before the wall itself. It would seem that the Romans forged relations with the locals rather than just conquering them. A large number of farms with no defences were found as well as an aqueduct, built well north of the wall, next to a native settlement. These finds do not suggest that this was a conflict area – you would not put your water in your enemies' hands. In fact, new finds at Vindolanda suggest that the fort there was built about 50 years before Hadrian's Wall was. This all points to the fact that, for a brief time at least, Roman Britain was a peaceful place even at the borders and that Romans in Britain did not feel the need to separate themselves from the natives. We can assume that the culture of Roman Britain may have been a mix of Roman and local populations, and that the conquest of Britain was more than just a colonial occupation; that the natives and Romans could

coexist peacefully.

The building of Hadrian's Wall is also interesting. If in fact this area of Britain was peaceful, why build such a large barrier? Perhaps it served as a deterrent to the natives so that they would never think of rebelling. It might have been to lay claim to the area they had won already if they were not thinking of going any further north. It might also have just been to show the power of Rome and its permanent presence, which would not only stop any rebellions but would also give confidence to the locals in their invaders and protectors. It would also certainly give the Romans the power to control what was entering and leaving the country, which created many potential advantages and more security yet again. Any of these reasons can tell us a lot about the society in Roman Britain. It shows a possessive nature which wanted to mark what was theirs obviously with a sign which would last for millennia. It also shows a careful, calculating side – the Romans thought about any problems which might arise in the future and stopped them before they started while gaining more power in the short term.

All roads lead to...

Roads were another important feature of Roman Britain as they were the first good system for travelling around Britain – they were so well built and planned that many are still in use today. The Romans joined up the country with huge roads such as Ermine Street, just one of many, which ran from London to Lincoln and York and was 193 miles long. Although they were primarily for moving troops, these streets were also vital for trade and civilian use which connected Roman Britain together as a whole. This definitely shows us something about Roman society in Britain. Instead of isolated communities that occasionally interacted, Roman Britain was one entity, itself connected to the larger society of Rome and its colonies by shipping and other routes like the network of roads. The people here were investigatory, they wanted the advantages which travel could bring; Roman society in Britain displayed, in fact, the very attitude which led them there in the first place.

What can be learned about the society and culture in Roman Britain from non-literary sources is very significant; in fact they often give us a good idea of the attitudes and opinions of the original people. This is true not just of the huge monuments, but also of the everyday items and other things which surrounded Roman Britons every day. From roads and villas to broken shoes and shards of amphorae, these non-literary artefacts shed light on the attitudes, problems, needs and fears of the people. These were the people of

Roman Britain who were the society and its culture for nearly 400 years.

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